Significant Factors in the Development of Transfer and Articulation Policies among Post-Secondary Institutions in British Columbia

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Prepared for and Funded by the

BRITISH COLUMBIA COUNCIL ON ADMISSIONS & TRANSFER
SUPPORTING BC's EDUCATION SYSTEM

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Preface

The purpose of this paper is to document a number of critical factors which initiated and sustained successful transfer and articulation policies among the many diverse institutions which constitute the post-secondary education system in British Columbia. The paper is not intended to read as a comprehensive history of the transfer phenomenon. Readers who are interested in a detailed historical account of this subject should consult a manuscript prepared by Lesley Andres and Jane Dawson entitled "Investigating Transfer Project: A History of Transfer Policy and Practice in British Columbia." This report is available from the B.C. Council on Admissions and Transfer at: **http://www.bccat.bc.ca/pubs/itp3.pdf**.

Given the traditional values respecting university autonomy and academic independence in Canada, the practice of student transfer with credit from one institution to another did not simply happen. In fact, in many provinces it is still not practised in a formally structured manner. In British Columbia, however, a number of significant factors, beginning with the advent of community colleges in the late 1950s, contrived to ensure that student transfer to university did occur with the support of both sending and receiving institutions.

This paper outlines a brief account of those factors and in doing so provides a testimony to those influential individuals who took the initiative and with imagination, energy, and a good deal of trust in the integrity of their colleagues, developed a transfer and articulation system unequalled in Canada.

Significant factors

The story of the community colleges in British Columbia did not begin with the Macdonald Report of 1962. Action had already commenced in 1958 when the Public Schools Act was amended to allow school boards to establish two-year colleges, in reality Grades 13 and 14, as extensions of the secondary school curriculum. At that time, a number of the larger high schools in the province were permitted to offer a thirteenth year from which, by agreement with the University of B.C., successful graduates were granted academic equivalency with the first year of Arts and Science.

The motivation for the amendment to the Public Schools Act was public concern over limitations upon access to degree programs at the only public university in the province. The University of British Columbia, located in Vancouver, together with a satellite campus in Victoria, comprised the single option for students wishing to pursue advanced academic study leading to professional and other qualifications. For those residing outside the Lower Mainland and Victoria relocation and its associated expenses were considerable barriers to those aspiring to continue their education. Hence, the opportunity for school boards to establish two year colleges contained the expectation that the initial years of a university degree program would be offered with the assumption that successful completers would have the option to transfer to the third year of university degree studies with full recognition of academic credits earned at college. This model had been in vogue in numerous US states for many years.

There was, however, an important and significant clause in the amendment. If a school board were to establish a college, it would be in "affiliation with the University of British Columbia." This particular requirement reflected the influence of the then president of UBC, Norman MacKenzie, who was most concerned that the limited number of public dollars assigned to post-secondary education should not be widely distributed. However, the more important implication of an affiliation agreement would be the assurance that all credits successfully completed at the college would receive automatic recognition after those students transferred to the university. One may speculate that, had the affiliation principle been adopted, future transfer policy might have been on a mandatory, rather than a voluntary basis.

Action based on the amendment was taken by the Kelowna School Board which commissioned a feasibility study by Ann Dawe who recommended that, on the basis of the number of potential students and the tax base of the district, a college was viable. Nevertheless, this recommendation was not translated into action before the publication of the Macdonald Report in 1962. In the interim, the 1960 Chant Report on Education, while focussing essentially upon the K-12 system, did propose the creation of "collegiate academies" which would include grades 11, 12, and 13. The academies were to offer a two-stream curriculum, one leading to university, the other to employment or advanced technical training.

The initiative taken by the newly appointed president of UBC, John B. Macdonald, to undertake a study of the higher education status and needs of the province, proved to be the most influential resource in the future of the post-secondary system of British Columbia. In preparing his report Macdonald had brought together a team of distinguished colleagues each contributing expertise on aspects of finance, location, curriculum and management of a new system of community colleges.[1] Macdonald was much impressed by the briefs submitted by the B.C. School Trustees Association and the individual boards which argued the case for colleges under the aegis of the school trustees. Macdonald rejected the concept of affiliation with the university and argued that excellence required that the proposed two-year colleges be autonomous self-governing institutions funded in part by the school boards through local taxation.

Underlying Macdonald's proposed model was that students would be able to transfer two years of academic credit to the universities upon completion of their college studies.[2] However, the idea of transfer with credit from community college to university was not an accepted policy in Canada at that time, although many observers were aware of the practice in the United States. It could be anticipated that the senate, the governing academic body of the University of British Columbia, would need to be convinced that several concerns, particularly about the quality of both students and course standards in the colleges, were resolved to its satisfaction before the policy was approved.

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[1] Several members of the Macdonald "team", John Chapman, Ron Jeffels, Ron Baker and Walter Hardwick, were later to assume leadership roles in the development of the post-secondary education system.

[2] As part of his report Macdonald noted, "Transfer should be possible between institutions but it should be based not on identity of courses but on performance of students. Admission policies should be concerned less with prerequisites but more with evidence of ability...."

In addition to his recommendations respecting regional colleges, Macdonald also expressed the need for two, and later three, four year colleges. In effect, the system model proposed was comparable to that long established in the state of California. *Inter alia*, Macdonald, cognisant of the need to monitor standards and alleviate concerns over academic quality, recommended the creation of an Academic Board which was "to collect, examine and provide information relating to academic standards, and to advise the appropriate authorities on orderly academic development of universities established under this Act and of colleges established under the Public Schools Act by keeping in review the academic standards of each..."

The Academic Board was subsequently created and was composed of three members from each senate of the now three universities (UBC, Simon Fraser and Victoria),[3] and three lay appointees. No college representatives were included. Of major significance, however, was the choice of the chairman, Sperrin Chant, a former Dean of Arts and Science at UBC and a widely respected academic whose influence was considerable.

By 1966 two colleges, Vancouver and Selkirk, the latter in the interior of the province, had sent transfer students to the universities whose credits had been recognised, partly due to the encouragement of Dean Chant, and on the basis of informal agreements between the colleges and the academic departments of the receiving institutions. Although the numbers were small, follow-up studies had been conducted on the performance of transfer students which showed encouraging results. While the performance of those transferring with one year standing was below that of university students, the record of those earning two years credit was comparable to their university counterparts.

As several new colleges were in the planning and establishment phase, the Academic Board assumed a leadership role in formalising the transfer process. Some well-publicized confusion over transfer credit at Simon Fraser University had made it evident that students needed greater assurance that the courses they had completed at college would receive full credit on transfer. In 1968, the Academic Board sponsored a meeting of university and college representatives in a variety of disciplines to discuss the transfer process. This meeting resulted in the formalization of "articulation" committees in each appropriate discipline which were to meet on a regular basis to share information and debate curriculum changes and other issues. Subsequently, each university published a "transfer guide" which listed equivalent university and college courses.

These policies and practices endured during the life of the Academic Board which was finally abolished in 1974. Its responsibilities with respect to transfer were then undertaken by the Post-Secondary Articulation Coordinating Committee, established by the Ministry. Its membership included one senior academic officer from each public college and university plus the registrar from each of the three universities. Appointed by the Minister, its first chair, Ian McTaggart-Cowan, was a well known and highly respected scholar, former Dean of Graduate Studies at UBC, and also past chair of the Academic Board. This committee reinforced the importance of encouraging inter-institutional collaboration among three established universities and a growing number of new

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[3] The original proposal for four-year colleges was not implemented and Simon Fraser and Victoria opened as comprehensive universities.

community colleges so that transfer arrangements would be successfully negotiated. One of its most significant accomplishments was the development of a set of principles and guidelines for transfer which were subsequently adopted by all college councils and university senates. Meanwhile the ongoing work of the articulation committees and a growing reservoir of goodwill and trust between the sending and receiving departments ensured that the process continued successfully.

In 1977, the government passed the College and Institute Act which introduced three new agencies, one being an Academic Council which assumed responsibility for managing the articulation committees and the transfer process in general. Again, under its influential chairman, Ian McTaggart Cowan, those disputes which arose were eventually resolved. Notwithstanding the Council's efforts some underlying issues remained. Potential college transfer students had to contend with three separate and distinct transfer guides, sometimes with different requirements with respect to courses and credit values. College representatives often resented, with some justification, that, inevitably, universities held most of the power in setting transfer terms and conditions.

Following a good deal of controversy all three Councils were abolished in 1983, but the Post-Secondary Articulation Coordinating Committee, which had been conducting its work under the aegis of the Academic Council, continued to manage the transfer process successfully. The discipline-based articulation committees also continued to meet and deal with course equivalency at the department level.

After a period of fiscal restraint, in 1987 the government began to encourage growth in the system of advanced education by creating a Provincial Access Committee which adopted six guiding principles, one being that "similar courses and programs throughout the advanced education and job training system... should be designed to facilitate credit transfer from one institution to another." In fact, admissions, transfer and articulation were among the five priority concerns of the Committee.

The report of the Access Committee resulted in the establishment of the B.C. Council on Admissions and Transfer (BCCAT). The Council, a formal but non-legislated agency, assumed responsibility for every aspect of the transfer process. Its first executive director, Grant Fisher, a former President of Camosun College and later an Associate Deputy Minister, provided sensitive leadership which ensured support from all components of the system. The Council, however, had no statutory authority and served essentially as a catalyst in the negotiation of articulation agreements between a rapidly expanding number of autonomous post-secondary institutions. Actually, the concept of voluntary cooperation was the keystone to the success of the transfer and articulation policies and processes in British Columbia.

Inter alia, BCCAT took the initiative by publishing a single Transfer Guide which reported each transfer agreement, course or program, made among all public and selected private institutions. The Council also assumed responsibility for assisting and monitoring the work of the articulation committees, conducted meetings on transfer innovations, and sponsored research projects on the performance of transfer students, admission issues and updates on the success of various developments in the transfer process. As the Council was composed of representatives of each component of the system, including the private sector, its credibility was unchallenged.

As the system of advanced education became more complex, with the inclusion of many new degree granting institutions, the role and responsibility of BCCAT grew in kind.[4] Under its new Executive Director, Frank Gelin, among other initiatives the Council implemented a Web-based transfer guide and examined and recommended alternative and more flexible approaches to transfer credit arrangements. While the directors were occasionally called upon to resolve disputes between institutions, the Council received high commendation from the Ministry and other elements of the system.

Conclusion

The foregoing comments provide a brief account of the transfer and articulation process involving different and often diverse institutions of post-secondary education in British Columbia from 1963 to the present. On all measures it has been a successful venture, arguably more so than in any other province. In summary, it is useful to review those elements of the process which contributed to its success.

A. A critical decision was the selection of the individual first charged with the development of a system of colleges and universities which would cooperate in an endeavour to ensure that students who met stated criteria would be able to transfer from one level of the system to another without unnecessary barriers or constraints. Initially, the universities had to be assured that such a process was possible without violating their traditional autonomy over academic policies. Dean Sperrin Chant possessed all of the credentials necessary. He was a respected academic whose influence with the universities was unequalled. He projected a quality driven yet sympathetic brief for the colleges and he had the managerial skills to bring all elements of the system together. Chant's vision led to many of the policies which followed. His example was followed by a series of individuals who provided the leadership so vital to successful implementation of these policies.

B. As chair of the Academic Board, Chant recognized that academic departments at the discipline levels held the key to recognition of course and program equivalency. The Board moved swiftly to involve these individuals in a series of meetings which addressed curriculum content and quality assurance issues. These articulation committees continued to meet over the next 37 years, broadening their influence as system issues emerged. There is little doubt that these committees were essential to the success of the enterprise.

C. The achievement of the B.C. Council on Admissions and Transfer, and its predecessor organizations, could be attributed to several factors. In particular, its status as an objective, non-aligned agency, which respected the autonomy of all institutions over curriculum matters, was critical. It is fair to say that the Council's powerlessness, in a statutory context, was a major asset. The decision of government to fund the Council, while remaining directly uninvolved in its affairs, was a wise one much appreciated by all institutions. As noted earlier, the principle of voluntary cooperation among member institutions was to become a key factor in the transfer process.

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[4] The creation of three new universities, five university colleges and the decision to award degree granting authority to the B.C. Institute of Technology and the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design added further complexity to the transfer system. In 2002, legislation was introduced to permit all community colleges to offer applied degrees and establish a formal mechanism by which private post-secondary institutions could offer degrees within British Columbia.

D. Another important element in the transfer process is the amount of information, generated mostly by BCCAT, which reports on every dimension of the process. All of this information is freely available to institutions and students alike and provides reassurance that the process does work effectively. There remain, nevertheless, some problems as yet beyond the power of BCCAT to resolve. The most serious is the limited and unpredictable capacity of the system and the individual institutions to absorb all who seek a place in a particular course or program. While many students qualify for transfer to their program of choice, they often find that the number of available seats is severely limited. The admission component of the Council's mandate remains an ongoing challenge which is likely to become more intense.

E. In the end, however, the most important factor is the recognition that articulation and transfer policies and practices are built upon trust among institutions. Trust is a fragile concept and as an ancient Roman scholar noted, "trust, like the soul, once departed, never returns." Each institution expects the others to follow the agreed-upon protocols, meet their obligations, and respect the terms and conditions under which transfer occurs. No single individual or agency, government or otherwise, can ensure that these conditions are maintained. It is up to each college, institute, and university, public or private, to maintain the integrity of the transfer process.